

25th - 27th May – Days of Decision

Problems of communications, between commanders at Heraklion and Retimo with Suda Force Headquarters, contributed to the lack of support for the Retimo garrison from the east, where the defenders were well in control of the situation.

Following their successes at Maleme, the enemy reinforced the Heraklion forces with 400 paratroops dropped west and south of the perimeter. By that time, the survivors of the first days of the battle were suffering from lack of rations and water and their failure to achieve their anticipated early victory.

The arrival of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, after marching overland from the south coast, still further strengthened the Heraklion defenders.

One gunner recorded: *"there are plenty of planes about but they are keeping out of range of our guns. The machine-guns on the hill are a nuisance to us."*

A heavy bombing attack was launched on the afternoon of the 25th May on Heraklion – the town from which paratroops had been driven out, soon after they entered it and briefly occupied the quayside and the western section. The town was vengefully laid waste.

That night, following the raid, the commander of the German troops dropped on the west and south of the defence perimeter, moved his force to the high ground on Apex Hill, where his light artillery would be able to attack the airfield.

In the Maleme sector, the morning of 25th May brought the expected attack on the new line at Galatas. Mortar and aircraft bombing attacks in the morning were followed by Messerschmitt fighter-bombers and Stukas leading the assault on the Galatas Heights.

Mountain Division troops pressed their advance, superbly armed with automatic weapons, grenades, mortars and telescopic sights for marksmen's rifles. As daylight faded, they took the heights and could see Suda Bay ahead of them.

Reinforcements arrived for the hard-pressed New Zealanders of the 5th Brigade, in the form of 4th Brigade Band and the Kiwi Concert Party, followed by Divisional Signallers and other groups. Kippenger organised them in defence behind stone walls as other groups joined the lines. Late in the afternoon he decided on a counter-attack on the village to be led by two tanks. They moved off at dusk, 200 men following with fixed bayonets. The battle raged from house to house and through the square until the German forces were cleared from the village of Canea.

Freyberg described the counter-attack as "*one of the great efforts of the New Zealanders in the defence of Crete.*"⁽⁵⁶⁾ It stopped the German advance temporarily and stabilised the line for the night of 25th May, but as Freyberg revealed in his communication with Middle East H.Q. he believed that "*our position here is hopeless. A small ill-equipped, immobile force such as ours cannot stand up against the bombing we have faced during the past seven days.*"⁽⁵⁷⁾

The R.A.F. had sent a force of Hurricane fighters with Blenheim and Maryland bombers to attack Maleme on 25th May. They claimed to have destroyed 24 transport and fighter aircraft but German reinforcements still arrived at the rate of 3000 per day.

Strong enemy forces moving eastward compelled the weary defenders, short of ammunition and rations, to steadily withdraw, Greek units in the hills to the south, assisted by local villagers, fought splendidly to delay the enemy advance.

Freyberg's plan to withdraw to the south coast when approval was granted, required the establishment of supplies of ammunition and rations along the track to Sphakia to sustain a successful rearguard action; an early decision from Cairo was essential to ensure this could be done.

Destroyers "Hero" and "Nizam" and the mine-layer "Abdiel" delivered 80 tons of rations and ammunition and a Commando "Layforce" on the night of 26th May. Ten tons of the stores were loaded on a barge to proceed to Retimo which was then isolated, short of food and ammunition, and in imminent danger of falling to the enemy advancing from the west, along with Heraklion once Suda was lost.

As Brigade Commanders withdrew their units eastward from beyond Canea, communications became so confused that the Reserve Force from Suda (1 Welch, 1 Rangers, and Northumberland Hussars), moving in darkness, took up positions west of Canea without realising that their flanks were unprotected.

Gunner Dickinson's diary for 26th May records: "*Took positions on bare hill digging in six inches or so. Bombers and spotters over all day. Further along our ridge fellows took a terrible pasting. We lost two men. Lay 'doggo' trying to camouflage ourselves with anything at hand; in hot sun for fourteen hours dawn to dusk. Nest of ants added to my discomfort. 2200 hrs ordered to retreat 4 or 5 miles to Suda Bay to spot where we first landed. Arrived 0300 hrs. Grove littered with abandoned equipment, mainly Marines' personal gear. Got change of clothing. Dug trenches.*"

At daylight, roving enemy aircraft opened the attack. Soon heavy mortar fire and outflanking moves forced withdrawal to the east. Behind the retreating Reserve Force, and still further to the east, a

(56) Stewart p392

(57) Long p247

battle erupted as Germans advancing from the south, trying to reach Suda Bay, met the troops of the Australian 19 Brigade and New Zealand units which had taken up defensive positions along the sunken road – 42nd Street.

A German Mountain Regiment of approximately 400 men approached along the road leading to Suda. New Zealand Battalion Commanders had previously agreed that, if the enemy came to close quarters, they would fire and charge. There is some doubt about which unit charged first but the New Zealand Official Historian's account states: *"The Australian 2/7th Battalion and the Maoris (28th) quickly joined by others (including 21st Battalion) burst upon them from among the patchwork shadows. In a savage fight they had been held and then overcome by fire from their own captured weapons. Within a few minutes 1 Battalion of the 141 Mountain Regiment had been driven more than half a mile to the west and was virtually finished. About 300 Germans had been killed or wounded."*⁽⁵⁸⁾

Gunner Dickinson's diary entry continues: *"We were hopeful of evacuation. Lurching well when surprised by machine-gun and mortar fire from deep in grove. Jerry had broken through and was attacking. After some confusion, bayonet charge ordered as we were cut off. Everyone went yelling and shooting. Jerry pushed back about three-quarters mile losing many killed and few prisoners and guns, invaluable for our defences. Retired to position on sunken road after bayonet charge. Jack Tuck came on pile of dozens of dead Germans stacked up. We were instructed to hold our position till 2215 to allow other troops to withdraw – our battalion (21st N.Z. Br.) being rearguard.*

"Eerie business, firing occasional shots to delude Jerry. Withdrew 2215 past wharf and port of Suda to coast road then towards south of island. We marched, marched, blowing up bridges with Jerry having smelt a rat not far behind. An army can't win without air support. Branched into mountains. After fifteen miles threw ourselves down; dog-tired. A hard day."

Two hours later, survivors of Reserve Force moving eastward in small groups reached 42nd Street to meet the line of riflemen who had routed the Mountain Troops.

The 1 Welch Battalion suffered heavy casualties before their last resisting groups were overcome and the Germans entered Canea to release 300 of their captured paratroops.⁽⁵⁹⁾

A German account describes the scene in Canea after its capture: *"Thick clouds of smoke rise from the burning oil installation. Over all hangs the burning heat. Now the streets fill with parachutists happy to be among the survivors – English prisoners march through the streets; mixed with them are the*

(58) Davin p 378

(59) Kuhn p 120

Italians, themselves just freed from imprisonment, in torn dirty uniforms, their unabashed southern temperament overflowing as they weep with joy . . . Suddenly the released German prisoners appear and run to mix with the seething crowd in the central square." ⁽⁶⁰⁾

The courageous resistance by the Force Reserve and the holding of 42nd Street line enabled the main force to avoid encirclement and begin the evacuation towards Sphakia. The Germans, unaware of what was happening, pressed on with plans to capture Retimo and Heraklion.

Once War Office approved plans for the withdrawal and evacuation, it was agreed that the Navy would rescue as many as possible. Two relief efforts would be organised – one to Heraklion on the north of Crete and the other to Sphakia on the south coast.

The New Zealand and Australian Brigades began withdrawing southwards at nightfall on the 27th, anticipating that enemy forces, known to be in the hills and moving east, would try to cut their path. Laycock's Commandos were to cover the rear.

By daylight, the enemy, still intent on massing motor cycle and various motorised battalions of artillery, anti-tank gunners and engineers, to relieve their hard-pressed paratroops at Retimo and Heraklion, were unaware of the movement of the main force southward. Few planes flew over and when they did appear troops froze in their tracks and tried to blend with the landscape.

The first German unit to belatedly realise what was happening suffered heavy casualties as New Zealanders engaged them when they appeared from the west – too late to cut the escape route taken by the major force.

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Chappel, at Heraklion, on 27th May, received notice by cable that he was to organise the evacuation of 4000 troops. This unfortunately meant that Greek and Cretan troops would be left behind if all the British and Australian troops were embarked. Senior officers were informed of this decision on the morning of the 28th May. 7th Battery, involved in organising the path leading to the harbor, was to suffer tragic losses on the following day.

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At Retimo, dawn of the 27th May found Campbell's men fiercely contesting the issue with the enemy, still unaware that the battle in the west of Crete had been lost.

Freyberg had prepared to alert Campbell to the plans for evacuation, but the Motor Landing Craft which safely delivered the ten tons of supplies had left Suda without the vital orders.

(60) Stewart p 422 quotes Gericke p 120

Campbell's radio message acknowledged the receipt of the stores but made no mention of the message.

The intervening range of mountains, interfering with signals from Cairo, prevented direct contact with Retimo.

